

IDEA: HARNESS HOT WATER DEEP IN BUTTE'S MINES

By Justin Post

While mine yards from the Butte Hill's glory days sit deserted, a proposal is being considered that could awaken a sleeping giant: The towering Bell Diamond headframe.

Silver Star businessman Dennis Lester wants to develop the Bell Diamond to generate electricity by harnessing hot water thousands of feet below the mine's surface.

City officials are preparing to offer the Bell Diamond for industrial development through the developers' packet process after being approached by Lester, who owns Park Street Properties.

"We'll entertain a variety of proposals to use the property with special interest in renewable energy development projects," said planning director Jon Sesso.

The property would be available for lease under terms spelled out in the developers' packet, which is being prepared for release in the coming weeks, said Karen Byrnes, director of community development.

Lester reserved comment about his plans for the Bell Diamond until after he reviews the developers' packet.

He originally sought to lease the Travona, Mountain Con, Original and Steward mine yards with hopes of developing geothermal power plants.

The Bell Diamond is the most likely option because it's located in an industrial area and not near residential development, Sesso said.

A feasibility study would first be completed to determine whether it's practical to develop a geothermal power plant at the mine, he said.

The technology basically uses steam from water some 8,000 feet below the surface to turn turbines and generate electricity, Sesso said.

While the Bell Diamond is just over 3,600 feet deep, he said a developer could drill deeper using the existing shaft to access water at higher temperatures.

Aside from reaching the adequate depth, another hurdle in developing the property is developing durable equipment that can operate in extreme temperatures far below the ground, Sesso said.

"They've got a lot of figuring to do," he said. "This is step one."